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DOI:

[10.26613/3.1.42](https://doi.org/10.26613/3.1.42)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for published version (APA):

Allington, D., & Joshi, T. (2020). "What Others Dare Not Say": An Antisemitic Conspiracy Fantasy and its YouTube Audience. *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism*, 3(1), 35-53. <https://doi.org/10.26613/3.1.42>

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“What Others Dare Not Say”: An Antisemitic Conspiracy Fantasy and Its YouTube Audience

Daniel Allington and Tanvi Joshi

Abstract

The YouTube video-sharing platform is one of the most important sites for the dissemination of conspiracy theory, or—to give it a more accurately descriptive term—conspiracy fantasy. After surveying the historical and contemporary evidence for the role of conspiracy fantasy in right-wing violent extremism, this article turns its focus to a YouTube video excerpted from a public lecture in which professional conspiracy theorist David Icke purports to expose members of a “Rothschild Zionist” secret society. First, historical discourse analysis is used to situate Icke’s fantasy within the antisemitic tradition of the extreme right. Then, the reception of Icke’s fantasy is studied through quantitative content analysis of YouTube user comments ($n = 1123$). Comments supportive of the video and its creator are found to outnumber comments that challenge them, as are comments expressing hostility to Jews or extending the video’s accusations against “Rothschild Zionists” to real-world Jewish collectivities. Moreover, the most popular comments are found to be disproportionately likely to be supportive of Icke or his video or otherwise anti-Jewish. These findings provide evidence that at least the active portion of the video’s YouTube audience may have had a tendency not only towards support of Icke’s ideas but also towards linkage of those ideas with an overtly antisemitic worldview. It is argued that YouTube’s ranking of comments by popularity may be serving to insulate harmful fantasies such as Icke’s from rational challenge by rendering genuinely critical responses invisible. This illustrates the dangers of outsourcing the evaluation of content to an online user community. But it also suggests that YouTube’s user interface design may be actively contributing to the spread of misinformation and bigotry by placing those who try to oppose them at a disadvantage.

Keywords antizionism, audience, conspiracism, conspiracy fantasy, conspiracy theory, content analysis, David Icke, discourse analysis, reception, right-wing extremism, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracism has sometimes been theorised as an almost universal cognitive tendency,¹ with one popular introduction to the topic asserting that “huge numbers of people are conspiracy theorists when it comes to one issue or another.”² However, conspiracy believers evidently exist on a cline or spectrum, from those who may give only provisional credit to specific conspiracy accusations to those for whom fantasies of conspiracy appear to provide a complete

explanation of human society: as Aaronovitch puts it, “an idea of the world in which the authorities, including those we elect, are systematically corrupt and untruthful.”³ Although such a worldview is today associated with both populist and extreme manifestations of the political left and right,⁴ it is historically most closely associated with the antisemitic far right. Moreover, it is the centrality of conspiracy theory that most clearly distinguishes antisemitism from other forms of bigotry, such as anti-black racism.⁵

The current study takes for its object a video by the professional conspiracy theorist, David Icke, and the reception of the video by that proportion of its YouTube audience that actively responded by leaving comments or by clicking the “like” button on existing comments. A historical discourse analysis of one of Icke’s most popular videos is followed by a quantitative content analysis which treats both comments and “likes” of comments as reception data. This analysis provides evidence of the extent to which the video was accepted or rejected by its active online audience, as well as of the extent to which that audience responded to the video’s thinly veiled antisemitism with comments expressing anti-Jewish views of their own or extending its accusations of conspiracy from the “Rothschild Zionist” secret society of Icke’s imagination to real-world Jewish collectivities such as the State of Israel. But it also focuses attention on the mechanism by which the active audience is able to introduce bias into the “paratexts” with which YouTube surrounds each video.⁶ We argue that by outsourcing the evaluation of comments to a faceless, unaccountable online community, YouTube has inadvertently acted to protect bigoted and irrational video content from criticism and rebuttal.

Conspiracy Theory and Violent Extremism

Historical causality is never straightforward. But as Herf argues, “it was the conspiratorial aspects of modern antisemitism that were most important in fostering its radical, genocidal implications.”⁷ *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—a fraudulent and plagiaristic work of Tsarist propaganda purporting to expose a Jewish conspiracy to control the world through high finance and the press—formed a key ideological resource first for German nationalist terrorists, and then for the Austro-German Nazi regime.⁸ In Britain, the *Protocols* were sold by the British Union of Fascists and promoted by the Britons: a far-right organisation which proposed the expulsion of all Jews, and even entertained the

idea of killing Jews.⁹ Editors or publishers of the *Protocols* in other European countries not infrequently became significant figures in Nazi client regimes, with responsibility for implementing aspects of the Final Solution,¹⁰ and interviews with SS concentration camp guards show that they “believed absolutely in the Jewish world-conspiracy.”¹¹ A. K. Chesterton, founder of the National Front—an extreme right-wing British group—published a book-length work arguing first for the existence of an international conspiracy and then for the predominantly Jewish character of that conspiracy.¹² After Chesterton’s death, that work was incorporated into the radicalisation strategy used by the National Front, which made open allegations of a conspiracy involving international finance, and employed more discreet means to identify the conspirators as Jewish.¹³ Historical evidence shows that antisemitic conspiracy beliefs have played a role in motivating far right terrorist attacks in the United States, especially in white supremacist movements such as Christian Identity.¹⁴ Today, conspiracy beliefs form a component of multiple forms of political and religious extremist ideology,¹⁵ and are near-ubiquitous on the extreme right.¹⁶ As the introduction to a report on exchanges of such beliefs between the far right and the far left observes, “[t]hey are the lifeblood of hateful extremism: a way of explaining the world that involves identifying an evil enemy that is responsible for all the bad things that are happening.”¹⁷

It therefore seems appropriate that a UK government agency should have expressed concern regarding “the proliferation of conspiracy theories, including online, and the potential impact on radicalising people’s attitudes and behaviour towards others.”¹⁸ There has been a recent spate of terror attacks whose perpetrators or alleged perpetrators both identify with the political right and espouse belief in conspiracy theories.¹⁹ Researchers have stressed the importance of Islamophobic conspiracy theories in the ideology of Anders Breivik, who killed seventy-seven people in 2011.²⁰

The alleged Pittsburgh synagogue shooter, who killed eleven, was motivated by belief in the "white genocide," "great replacement," or "great substitution" conspiracy: the idea that a malevolent (and usually Jewish) elite has promoted non-white immigration into majority-white nations in order to weaken and dominate the white population.²¹ The alleged perpetrator of the Christchurch mosque shooting, in which fifty-one died, released a manifesto endorsing the same conspiracy fantasy, as did the alleged perpetrators of the El Paso mall shooting, in which twenty-two died, the Poway synagogue shooting, in which one died, and the Oslo mosque shooting, which resulted in no fatalities although it has been connected to a murder committed elsewhere.²²

Although the causes of deviant human behaviour are never easy to establish, it is intuitive to propose a link between the narratives that are commonly referred to as conspiracy theories and the acts of terror that some enthusiasts for such narratives commit. This is both because of thematic parallels between the narratives and the acts, and because the idea of a link has not infrequently been highlighted by the perpetrators themselves, or by those who speak for them. For example, lawyers for convicted terrorist Cesar Sayoc, who mailed explosive devices to a series of prominent critics of Donald Trump, presented their client as a vulnerable individual who became "fixated on conspiracy theories [that] he read about on social media."²³ The parallels between Sayoc's conspiracist beliefs and his crimes were nowhere more apparent than with regard to the first of his targets, the famously Jewish investor and philanthropist, George Soros:

Sayoc circulated one meme at least seven times that described Soros as a 'Judeo-plutocratic Bolshevik Zionist world conspirator'. Sayoc also made death threats through Twitter, including one against Soros and another against a gun control activist linked to him in a conspiracy theory that [Sayoc] circulated at least 99 times. On the day that [Sayoc's] pipe bomb was

delivered to Soros's address, Sayoc shared a cluster of anti-Soros memes. These included one from [David] Icke proclaiming urgently that . . . "[THE] WORLD IS WAKING UP TO THE HORRORS OF GEORGE SOROS".²⁴

Although Sayoc apparently did not intend to be identified and captured, the other cases outlined above suggest that a pattern has been established whereby right-wing extremists attempt to use mass shootings as a means of providing their own conspiracy fantasies with an online audience. In a livestream broadcast begun just before the Halle synagogue shooting, in which two died, the alleged perpetrator denied the reality of the Holocaust, outlined a conspiracy fantasy about feminism and mass immigration, and finished with the words: "The root of all these problems is the Jew."²⁵ (Just as disturbingly, the mother of the accused subsequently told journalists that her son had nothing against Jews, only against "the people who stand behind financial power":²⁶ it is only from a conspiracist viewpoint that such a claim can make sense, given that the shooter struck not at an investment bank or stock exchange but at a Jewish place of worship.) To take another example, the perpetrator of the Hanau shisha bar shootings, who killed ten, held multiple conspiracy beliefs concerning secret societies, paedophilia, satanism, mind control, and "targeted individuals"—of which he believed himself to be one. His now-deleted website featured an illustrated autobiography in which he provided what he considered to be evidence for his supposed lifelong surveillance, expressed racist and genocidal views, and called for a strike both against the organisation that he saw as his nemesis and against the "degeneration" of the German *Volk*.²⁷ A few days before carrying out his crimes, he released a YouTube video announcing that the United States is "under control of invisible secret societies" who "abuse, torture, and kill little children in an unbelievable amount," and exhorting all Americans to "turn off the mainstream media" and "fight now."²⁸

Although conspiracy fantasies constantly re-emerge in new forms, they are highly repetitive, forming a cultural tradition thoroughly conventional in its fundamentals. For example, the “great replacement” conspiracy theory is often attributed to contemporary French writer Renaud Camus,²⁹ but something closely resembling it was observed to be central to National Front ideology as long ago as the 1970s.³⁰ Indeed, we would argue that it can be traced back at least as far as Adolf Hitler, who was obsessed with the supposed threat of race-mixing and wrote that the “ultimate aim” of “the Jew” is “the . . . chaotic bastardisation of the other peoples, the lowering of the racial level of the highest, and domination over this racial mush through the eradication of these peoples’ intelligentsias.”³¹ Today, variants on that theory are widely circulated in YouTube videos produced by individuals such as the aforementioned David Icke, who holds that an influx of non-European (Muslim) migrants to Europe is being organised by George Soros (as noted above, a Jew and an investor) on the orders of the Rothschild family (famous both for its Jewishness and for its association with banking), with the intention of rendering Europe more susceptible to control.³² Identification of such thematic and rhetorical echoes is the key methodological principle in the historical discourse analysis below.

YouTube, Conspiracy Theory, and Far-Right Radicalisation

YouTube plays an important role in disseminating conspiracy theories.³³ Research suggests that its recommendation engine may be algorithmically biased towards content of this type.³⁴ Moreover, a growing body of opinion characterises YouTube as a key component in the radicalisation infrastructure of the contemporary far right. As British campaigning group HOPE not hate writes with regard to the white supremacist movement known as the “alt-right,”

alt-right content producers have continued to see growth on YouTube, which is both central in disseminating their message and . . . relatively lenient towards the alt-right. YouTube also allows alt-right accounts . . . to monetise their channels, supplanting platforms . . . where users may have been blocked.³⁵

A recent study of YouTube comments found that “users consistently migrate from milder to more extreme content” on a “radicalisation pipeline” that runs from channels devoted to the discussion of controversial topics such as race via channels that “constantly flirt with concepts associated with [white supremacism],” especially conspiracy fantasies, to overt white supremacist channels.³⁶ A smaller study concluded that, while media attention has generally focused on the influence of off-mainstream online fora such as 4chan, “much [right wing] extremist content is happening front and centre, easily accessible on platforms [such as] YouTube.”³⁷

In June 2019, policy changes were announced to counter the spread of hate speech on YouTube,³⁸ although it was subsequently found that “significant antisemitic and white supremacist content continues to be accessible on YouTube even after the policy update.”³⁹ Moreover, because of YouTube’s policy of tolerance with regard to infractions committed *before* the policy change, many YouTube channels remain online despite having had older videos taken down in response to judgements of hateful content. One such channel belongs to David Icke.

David Icke

Former sportsperson, television presenter, and political spokesperson David Icke is a professional conspiracy theorist. He sells a range of merchandise, including self-published books, and gives public talks to paying audiences. His work is characterised by the fabrication of what Barkun calls “superconspiracies,” or “conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies

are believed to be linked together hierarchically," with "a distant but all-powerful evil force [said to be] manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors."⁴⁰ Icke's fantasies range across many conceptual domains, such as paedophilia, cannibalism, Satanism, child sacrifice, and mind control, as well as the idea that humans are enslaved by non-humans. But for all their morbid diversity, these narratives endlessly return to Jewish themes and Jewish villains: to George Soros and the Rothschild family, to Israel and to Zionism. His fans include such luminaries as the rock musician, Matt Bellamy, and the novelist, Alice Walker.⁴¹

Scholarly discussion of Icke has often glossed over the more troubling aspects of his fantasies. For example, Lewis and Kahn write that "Icke's project is two-fold: to provide a searching and devastating critique of the mainstream and then to offer an alternative, love, as a positive vision which might replace that which he has previously annulled."⁴² However, they make no attempt to explain why this "positive vision" should appeal to the violent neo-Nazi terrorist group Combat 18, among whose members they acknowledge some of Icke's fans to be found.⁴³ Similarly, Ward and Voas present Icke as a leading exponent of "conspirituality," which they define as "a means by which political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism."⁴⁴ But they dismiss the racism and antisemitism of conspiracy culture with an uncritical quotation of Icke's claim that "[w]e need to drop the ludicrous, childish labels of Jew and Gentile and Muslim and all this illusory crap and come together in the name of peace and justice for all."⁴⁵

Such claims should never be taken at face value. When made publicly in contexts where both public opinion and the law hold racism to be wrong, expressions of racism are *customarily* accompanied by denials of racism.⁴⁶ And this is no less true of antisemitism, accusations of which are routinely deflected through appeals to an easily-disavowed definition of antisemitism such as "hatred of Jews for their Jewishness."⁴⁷ Today, we are most accustomed to hearing such

deflections from the political left, as when the authors of a book defending the UK Labour Party from accusations of antisemitism define antisemitism as "an irrational hatred of Jewish people."⁴⁸ But this argumentative manoeuvre appears to have originated on the far right. In 1970, for example, the openly racist National Front (see above) claimed not to be "anti-Jewish" on the grounds that "none of [its] policies [were] directed against Jewish people or Jewishness *as such*" (emphasis added) and that it purportedly "criticise[d] . . . Zionists" not on account of their "race or religion" but "solely on account of their politics."⁴⁹ In practice, this has led to the development of a form of antisemitism "which claims to value highly the distinction between hostility to Zionism, or Israel, on the one hand, and Jews, on the other."⁵⁰ As Billig has observed with regard to the National Front, this involves using the word "Zionism" in its ordinary political sense, that is, as denoting "the movement of Jewish nationalism and commitment to the state of Israel," in order to "argu[e] for the political acceptability of an anti-Zionist stance," whilst at the same time continuing to use the word "Zionist" in order to evoke "the myth of a Jewish world conspiracy."⁵¹ Icke's avowed desire to "drop the . . . childish labels" need therefore be taken no more seriously than the cliché, "some of my best friends are black."

A more penetrating analysis is provided by Barkun, who observes that, while Icke does not deny the Holocaust, he blames it on "mysterious Jewish elites," especially the Rothschild family, which he alleges "brought Hitler to power," created Zionism, and "control[s] the State of Israel."⁵² This is a particularly offensive and historically illiterate example of the "Holocaust inversion" that characterises much contemporary antisemitic discourse.⁵³ As Barkun notes, Icke has repeatedly endorsed the accuracy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and has 'clearly sought to cultivate the extreme right', having 'not start[ed] out on the political right . . . but in time . . . c[o]me to accept much of the Christian Patriot position.'⁵⁴

ANALYSIS I: HISTORICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF DAVID ICKE'S VIDEO "WHAT OTHERS DARE NOT SAY"

This first analysis presented in this article focuses on a video uploaded to Icke's official YouTube channel on May 23, 2016, under the title of "David Icke—What Others Dare Not Say."⁵⁵ By the time of data collection in September 2018, it had accumulated 803605 views and 4275 comments. In apparent consequence of the aforementioned 2019 crackdown, the video page was eventually replaced with a placeholder stating that the video had been removed "for violating YouTube's policy on hate speech." But at the time of writing, at least two further videos featuring the same content remained on Icke's official YouTube channel.⁵⁶ Moreover, the removed video had also been uploaded on other YouTube channels.⁵⁷

The video presents an extract from a public lecture. Although the lecture also involves attacks on Israel couched in the language of anti-racism, its most notable feature is a list of prominent Jews. This list immediately follows the claim that "Israel is the fiefdom of the Rothschild dynasty, which also controls the American administration [and] the British administration." Such claims are characteristic of "antisemitic antizionism," an ideology within which Zionism is conceived as "a political, financial, military, and media conspiracy that is centred in Washington and Jerusalem."⁵⁸ Antisemitic antizionism, which may also be referred to as antizionist antisemitism,⁵⁹ can arguably be traced back to the *Protocols* themselves, which claimed to record a speech delivered to the First Zionist Congress. It can certainly be associated with the Nazi understanding of Jewish ambitions for a national home in terms of a "conspiracy theory . . . [in which] the Zionist project was [seen as] one component of international Jewry's drive for world domination."⁶⁰

Evidently aware that producing a list of Jews might be considered antisemitic, Icke begins with a denial of antisemitism:

In the *Matrix* movie, there's something called the "Zion mainframe." Well, Zionism,

Rothschild Zionism, is in so many ways the main frame of this network, it pervades all the way through, and it's not about "oh, there's Jewish people here and there's Jewish people there," it's Rothschild Zionists who are there, and they answer to the Rothschild dynasty, therefore they play out the agenda of the web in a coordinated way.

The "network" or "web" in question is represented by an image of a spiderweb onto which a number of symbols have been crudely superimposed: mostly national flags, but also logos of major corporations including Monsanto, Goldman Sachs, and the BBC; closest to the centre is a Rothschild family tree. The Rothschilds have long been the subject of antisemitic conspiracy theories,⁶¹ while the use of "Zionist" as euphemism for "Jew" has now become widespread in certain political circles,⁶² and implicit depiction of the Rothschild family as the spider at the centre of a web draws on well-established traditions of antisemitic visual culture in which the Jew is seen as a many-limbed creature such as a spider or octopus and also as a "wire-puller" connected to his minions by a network of radiating threads.⁶³ The substitution of "Rothschild Zionists" for "Jewish people," which forms the heart of Icke's denial of racism, must also be seen in context of the bogus statistical argument that immediately follows:

Before I start, one fact: Jewish people in America are less than two percent of the population, a significant number of them will not be Rothschild Zionists, and therefore the ratio of Rothschild Zionists is even smaller, significantly smaller than the two percent.

Icke argues that because some Jews are not "Rothschild Zionists," the number of "Rothschild Zionists" in America must be smaller than the number of American Jews, and that the overrepresentation of "Rothschild Zionists" in American politics is therefore greater than one would think if one began with the assumption that all Jews are "Rothschild

Zionists." But that conclusion can only follow if there are virtually no "Rothschild Zionists" who are *not* Jews. In other words, Icke implies that while not all Jews are "Rothschild Zionists," there are so few "Rothschild Zionists" who are not Jews that the existence of such non-Jewish "Rothschild Zionists" does not need to be taken into account in estimating the overall number of "Rothschild Zionists" in America. The association of "Rothschild Zionism" with Jewishness—already obvious in the use of the name "Rothschild" and the word "Zionism"—is thereby affirmed. Moreover, Icke's assertion of a disproportionately high "ratio" is very familiar from antisemitic propaganda. Indeed, it is the same argument that was made in one of the first antisemitic editorials published in Henry Ford's notorious *Dearborn Independent*:

Here in the United States, it is the fact of this remarkable minority—a sparse Jewish ingredient of three per cent in a nation of 110 000 000—attaining in 50 years a degree of control that would be impossible to a ten times larger group of any other race, that creates the Jewish Question. Three per cent of any other people would scarcely occasion comment, because we would not meet with a representative of them whenever we went in high places . . . Yet we meet the Jew everywhere in the upper circles, literally everywhere there is power.⁶⁴

When Icke proceeds to list the members of a world-controlling conspiracy, he is implicitly making the same point, first drawing attention to the small number of Jews in the United States, and then drawing attention to what will seem to be a large number of Jews with some degree of political influence. (This number only appears to be large because Icke provides no context for it: there are thousands of individuals whom one could include in an arbitrary list of any large nation's most influential people.) While Icke claims that he will not be pointing out "Jewish people here and . . . Jewish people there," most of the names he recites are obviously Jewish. The

production of such lists is a common strategy among conspiracy theorists. As Byford argues,

Even just the constant repetition of recognisably Jewish names in the context of the narrative of conspiracy, and the allusion to Jewish individuals and families as the source of longstanding sinister influence in the world, desensitises the consumers of these seemingly innocuous conspiracy theories and broadens the boundaries of acceptable opinion to the point where the notion of a Jewish conspiracy becomes recognised as a legitimate explanation of political and historical reality.⁶⁵

This is the underlying logic of Icke's lecture. Icke connects four individuals to the supposed "Rothschild Zionist" secret society without specifically identifying them as "Rothschild Zionists." Of the four, three are Jewish and have Jewish names, while one is not Jewish but has a Jewish name because his father was Jewish. In addition to these four individuals, there are twenty-five more whom Icke directly identifies as "Rothschild Zionists." At least twenty of the twenty-five are Jewish. Of the remaining five, two have Jewish or German names, and one is described as a "Rothschild Zionist . . . in belief if nothing else"—which clearly implies that one would usually be expected to be a "Rothschild Zionist" in *something more than belief*. Again, the implication is that the great majority of "Rothschild Zionists" will be Jews.

It is important to emphasise that Icke's lecture does not engage with the real-world politics of Israel. It is, rather, an example of what Cohen calls "anti-Zionism without Zion": a form of discourse on something which is labelled "Zionism" yet "transcends anything done by the Israeli state" and as such "could just as easily exist without Israel," being simply a repackaging of traditional antisemitic ideas under a different name.⁶⁶ Rather than set out any sort of rational analysis, Icke evokes the discursive traditions of antisemitism through innuendo, creating the impression of a sinister network merely by reciting Jewish name after

Jewish name and appending to each the racially-charged label of “Rothschild Zionist”: “David Axelrod, Rothschild Zionist . . . George Soros, Rothschild Zionist . . . Henry Kissinger, massive Rothschild Zionist,” and so on. In Icke’s hands, the “Rothschild Zionist” label appears indiscriminately applicable to anyone who both (a) holds a prominent social position and (b) either (i) is Jewish or (ii) can plausibly be associated with Jews. Labelling individuals in this way implicates them in a supposedly powerful and secretive network, of whose existence Icke apparently needs provide no further evidence.

In Icke’s discourse, as in that of earlier conspiracy fantasists, it appears that any Jew who achieves prominence can potentially be accused of being part of a conspiracy on grounds merely of the conjunction of his or her (a) Jewishness and (b) prominence. This is a well-established mode of thought on the far right: Billig, for example, observed that, for some of the National Front members whom he interviewed in the 1970s, “the fact that a leading politician, financier, or communist might be Jewish [in itself] constituted sufficient proof that he must be a Zionist conspirator.”⁶⁷ The deadly potential of that way of understanding the world has been apparent since 1922, when a leading German politician was murdered by men who believed him literally to be one of the Elders of Zion.⁶⁸ But such accusations have also been used to justify violence against others besides the individuals directly accused, because the purported existence of the conspiracy places all Jews under suspicion: to use the words of an antisemitic publication from which we have already heard, the implication is that “[t]he international Jew . . . rules not because he is rich, but because in a most marked degree, he . . . avails himself of a racial loyalty and solidarity the like of which exists in no other human group.”⁶⁹ In 1941, a Nazi propaganda directive issued by the Reich Press Office “listed . . . [Franklin D. Roosevelt’s] Jewish friends and advisers” in a pretence of informing German citizens of “the institutional location and the personal identity of the Jews striving for power in the United States”

and thus supplying “the names and faces of the American branch of the international Jewish conspiracy.”⁷⁰ Within months, the genocide of European Jews had begun.

ANALYSIS II: QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS ON DAVID ICKE’S VIDEO “WHAT OTHERS DARE NOT SAY”

The Interest of YouTube Comments

The historical analysis above has established that Icke’s argument in the video is both virulently racist and substantially derivative of a discursive tradition closely tied to the genocidal antisemitism of the extreme right. However, it might have been the case that it met with sustained criticism online and was rejected by the audience to which YouTube displayed it—in which case, we could perhaps feel reassured that it had been able to cause comparatively little harm. For that reason alone, we should look systematically at the responses that it elicited via the YouTube platform. But there is a further reason for taking its online reception seriously.

This is that comments left on YouTube videos provide the illusion of peer review for the content of those videos. More popular comments are ranked more highly in YouTube’s default view, with the most popular of them appearing directly below the videos on which they were made. Presentation alongside the videos themselves gives such comments something like the privileged status of what Genette calls “paratexts”: subsidiary textual elements positioned in order to exert “an influence on the public . . . at the service of a better reception for the [primary] text.”⁷¹ Comments on YouTube videos are closely analogous to customer reviews on products sold by online retailers, and there exists a considerable body of empirical research whose findings suggest that such reviews exert a measurable influence on purchasing decisions.⁷² It is therefore by no means fanciful to suppose that a video’s surrounding penumbra

of comments might influence its viewers in their decision to "buy" its message.

Research Questions

The aim of the second analysis presented in this study is therefore to discover the extent to which the active audience for this YouTube video responded with endorsement or critique (whether directly, by commenting, or indirectly, by "liking" comments), as well as the extent to which it expressed and endorsed a bigoted or hateful view with regard to what the first part of the analysis has established to be the video's implicit target, that is, Jewry. Two research questions follow from this aim:

RQ1. How frequent are comments which support Icke and/or his message (without necessarily expressing antisemitic views of their own), and comments which express antisemitic views of their own (without necessarily endorsing Icke and/or his message), as compared to comments which do not, and how many "likes" are received by comments which challenge Icke and/or his message, as compared to comments which do not.

RQ2. How many "likes" are received by comments which support Icke and/or his message (without necessarily expressing antisemitic views of their own), and comments which express antisemitic views of their own (without necessarily endorsing Icke and/or his message), as compared to comments which do not, and how many "likes" are received by comments which challenge Icke and/or his message, as compared to comments which do not.

If comments supporting Icke and/or his message are more numerous and/or more popular than comments which challenge Icke and/or his message, then this will suggest that the active audience with which YouTube furnished Icke was more receptive than critical. And if comments expressing antisemitic views, are more numerous and/or more popular than

comments which challenge Icke and/or his message, then this will suggest that it responded to the antisemitism of his message by making or endorsing further expressions of antisemitism more frequently than by making or endorsing critical comments. If this is the case, then such findings would also suggest that comments of these types, rather than of the critical type, may have had a systematic advantage in terms of their own audience exposure, and therefore been gifted greater and more frequent opportunities to exert an influence on the video's YouTube reception.

Data Collection and Coding

There are two categories of comments on a YouTube video page: top-level comments, made on the video itself, and second-level comments, which respond to top-level comments. While it would have been possible to select a random sample of comments on the video using the YouTube API, this would have removed comments from their argumentative context, rendering accurate classification problematic. Instead, the following procedure was employed. First, the *SORT BY > Newest first* option was selected on the video page and the page was scrolled downward until all top-level comments less than three years old were displayed. Second, all comment threads were expanded, revealing all second-level comments on the aforementioned top-level comments. Third, all top-level and second-level comments were expanded to full length. Fourth, the complete page was exported as a PDF.

Content analysis begins with a process much like that used in coding responses to open questionnaire items, with the aim being to categorise texts or messages (here, YouTube comments) in a replicable way.⁷³ Here, a simple coding scheme (see below) was used to classify comments according to whether they supported or challenged Icke and his message, and according to whether they expressed recognisably anti-Jewish views. A value was assigned to each of

TABLE 1: Coding scheme

Variable	Meaning	Possible values
Supports Icke?	Comment expresses favourable evaluation of David Icke or of this particular David Icke video, including by asserting the truth of any of Icke's assertions in the video	Yes / No
Challenges Icke?	Comment expresses unfavourable evaluation of David Icke or of this particular David Icke video, including by denying or questioning the truth of any of Icke's assertions in the video	Yes / No
Anti-Jewish?	Comment expresses antisemitic views, including by applying Icke's accusations to real-world Jewish collectivities (including the State of Israel and its citizens). However, comments that use only Icke's term, "Rothschild Zionists," or that refer to Jewish individuals mentioned by Icke, are excluded	Yes / No
Likes	Number of likes recorded by the YouTube interface	Integer

TABLE 2: Measures of inter-rater reliability

Variable	%	κ	α
Supports Icke	90	0.77	0.77
Challenges Icke	99	0.79	0.79
Anti-Jewish	92	0.81	0.81

four variables for each comment. Three variables were categorical. The fourth variable was simply a transcription of the number of “likes” which the YouTube interface recorded each comment as having received. The variables and their possible values are given in table 1.⁷⁴

A total of 1123 comments were collected and coded, following the above process. The resulting data were then entered electronically by a member of staff at Quilliam International. The 169 most popular top-level comments at the time of data collection (on the default YouTube interface) were additionally collected and coded for calculation of inter-rater reliability. Percentage agreement, Cohen’s kappa, and Krippendorff’s alpha are provided in table 2. Percentage agreement ranged from 90–99%, while kappa and alpha ranged from 0.77–0.81. (For comparison, Lombard et al. observe that a coefficient of 0.80 on most indices is generally considered acceptable for most purposes but that “more

liberal criteria are usually used for . . . indices known to be conservative,” such as kappa and alpha.⁷⁵) It is concluded that the coding scheme is adequately reliable.

Findings: Frequency and Popularity of Supportive, Challenging, and Anti-Jewish Comments

For frequencies of codes within the sample, see fig.1 and table 3. 95% confidence intervals were calculated with correction for the total number of comments, on the assumption that the sample can be regarded as effectively random. If that assumption is rejected, the confidence intervals should be ignored but the observed frequencies remain valid both as descriptive statistics for the sample and as best estimates for the total population of comments. As we see, supportive comments were more frequent than anti-Jewish comments, while challenging comments were the least frequent of all. The differences

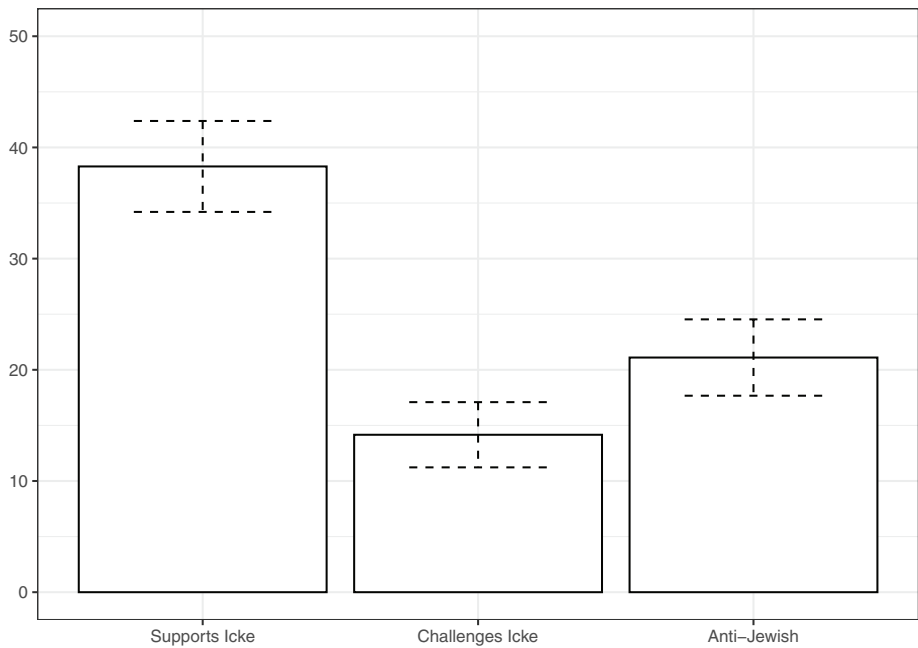


FIGURE 1. Percentage of comments coded as supportive, challenging, or anti-Jewish (with 95% confidence intervals)

TABLE 3: Comments coded as supportive, challenging, or anti-Jewish, and otherwise

				%	
Variable	Value	n	Obs.	Low	High
Supports Icke	No	693	62	58	66
Supports Icke	Yes	430	38	34	42
Challenges Icke	No	964	86	83	89
Challenges Icke	Yes	159	14	11	17
Anti-Jewish	No	886	79	75	82
Anti-Jewish	Yes	237	21	18	25

95% confidence interval calculated on the assumption that the data can be treated as equivalent to a random sample of comments.

between these frequencies were all outside the margin of error, which means that (given acceptance of the assumption above) we can be reasonably confident that a similar hierarchy would also have been observed had it

been possible to code all 4275 comments on the video.

Although the most popular comment in the sample received 428 likes, the distribution had a long tail, with 133 comments (or 12% of the

sample) receiving only a single like, and 817 comments (or 73% of the sample) receiving no likes at all.

Fig. 2 shows the mean number of likes for comments which were and were not coded as supportive, challenging, and anti-Jewish, and supportive and/or anti-Jewish, while table 4 shows the median, mean, and standard deviation for numbers of likes on comments coded in the same way. Comments that challenged Icke or his message received fewer likes than comments that did not, which Welch's unequal variances t-test confirms to be highly statistically significant on the assumption that the sample can be treated as equivalent to a random sample, $t(982.49) = -4.34, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-4.69, -1.77]$. Comments that supported Icke or his message received more likes on average than those that were not (including comments that did not support Icke or his message yet were anti-Jewish in their own right), although this was not statistically significant, $t(523.10) = 1.73, p = 0.085, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.37, 5.71]$, and comments that were anti-Jewish received more likes on average than comments that were not (including comments

that were not anti-Jewish in their own right yet supported Icke or his message), although that too fell short of statistical significance, $t(365.85) = 1.63, p = 0.105, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.54, 5.68]$. The greatest difference in numbers of likes was with regard to comments that were supportive of Icke or his message *and/or* were anti-Jewish, which on average received nearly six times more likes than comments which were *neither* supportive of Icke or his message nor anti-Jewish. This difference was very highly statistically significant, $t(589.38) = 3.56, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.99, 6.88]$.

In fact, anti-Jewish comments, and comments supportive of Icke or his message, were *overwhelmingly* dominant among the most popular comments. Fig. 3 shows the top 50 comments by number of likes, with the shape of each point indicating how the comment in question was coded. 38 of the top 50—including all of the top 10—were coded as supportive of Icke and/or as anti-Jewish. None was coded as challenging towards Icke or his message. Indeed, no comment coded in such a way received more than six likes.

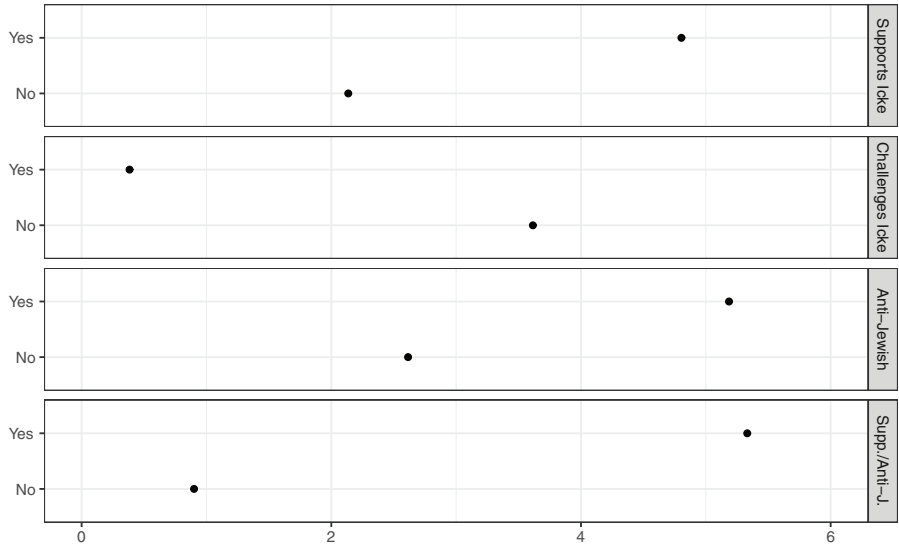


FIGURE 2. Mean likes for comments by code

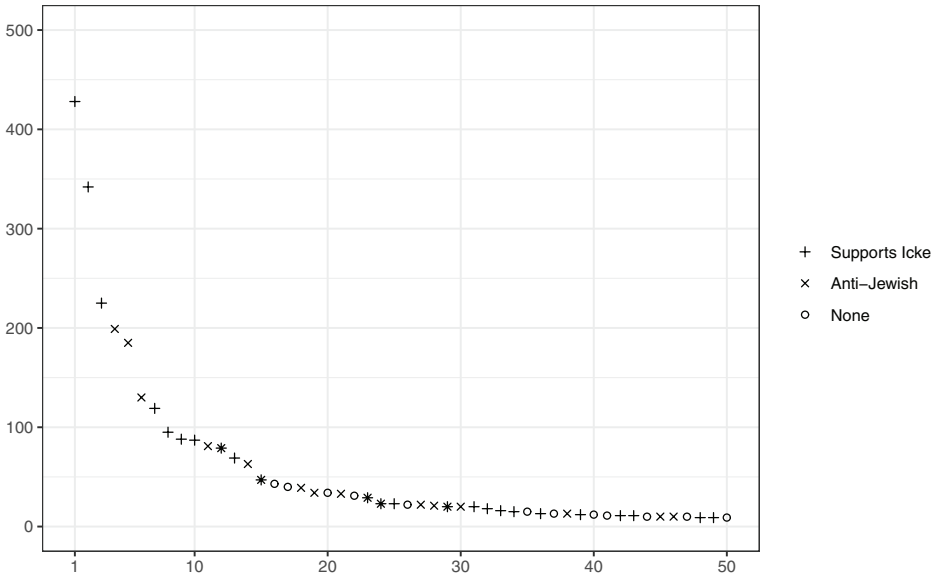


FIGURE 3. Coding and number of likes for the top 50 comments (ranked by number of likes)

TABLE 4: Likes for comments coded as supportive, challenging, anti-Jewish, and supportive and/or anti-Jewish, and comments coded otherwise: median, mean and standard deviation

Variable	Value	Likes		
		Md	M	SD
Supports Icke	Yes	0.00	4.80	30.46
Supports Icke	No	0.00	2.14	12.72
Challenges Icke	Yes	0.00	0.38	0.95
Challenges Icke	No	0.00	3.62	23.02
Anti-Jewish	Yes	0.00	5.19	21.72
Anti-Jewish	No	0.00	2.62	21.24
Supp./Anti-J.	Yes	0.00	5.33	29.56
Supp./Anti-J.	No	0.00	0.90	3.68

Table 5 presents a logistic regression model estimating the probability that a comment is neither anti-Jewish nor supportive of Icke or his message, given the number of likes that it received. Fig. 4 visualises the model (upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence interval are visualised as dashed lines and actual observations

are visualised as dots, scaled to compensate for over-plotting). For a comment with no likes, the probability of a comment's neither being supportive of Icke nor anti-Jewish is estimated to be about 50%. But as the number of likes rises, the estimated probability rapidly falls close to zero.

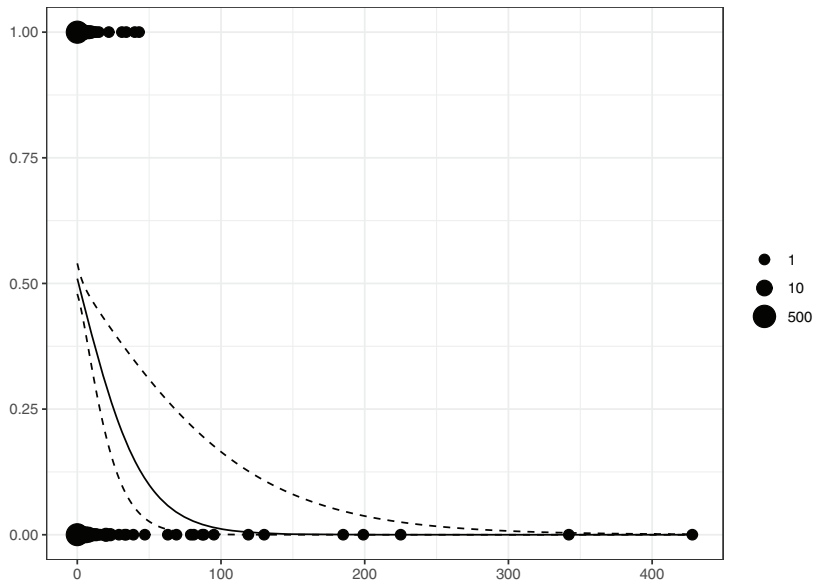


FIGURE 4. Estimated probability that a comment is neither supportive of Icke nor anti-Jewish, by number of likes (with 95% confidence interval)

TABLE 5: Logistic regression model (estimated probability of a comment's being neither supportive of Icke nor anti-Jewish, by number of likes)

	Est.	Low	High	SE	t	p
(Intercept)	0.04	-0.08	0.16	0.06	0.62	0.537
Likes	-0.04	-0.08	-0.02	0.01	-3.08	0.002

Residual degrees of freedom: 1121.
Significance and 95% confidence interval calculated on the assumption that the data can be treated as equivalent to a random sample of comments.

As explained above, overrepresentation of supportive and anti-Jewish comments among the most popular comments from members of this particular video's active audience may have had important consequences for the wider audience because, on the default view, the YouTube interface furnishes the most popular top-level comments with the most advantageous position on any given video page. To encounter less popular top-level comments, one must either switch to a different view or scroll downward—sometimes a very considerable distance.

(Most second-level comments are hidden until the threads containing them are expanded; full expansion of a thread may require several clicks.)

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The historical discourse analysis presented in this article demonstrates the persistence of classic antisemitic tropes in the discourse of one of the twenty-first century's best-known professional conspiracy fantasists. The antisemitism of Icke's lecture was encrypted, but—to a viewer versed

in conspiracist culture—it would not have been at all difficult to decrypt, because its tropes were derived from many decades of antisemitic elaboration on the *Protocols*. As the history of antisemitic conspiracy fantasy presented above shows, such discourse has played a role in inspiring and justifying atrocities from the early twentieth century to the present day. It seems unlikely that the lecture would have been able to exert much ideological influence on the typical English-speaking adult. Yet a combination of social media sharing and the YouTube recommendation algorithm are likely to have furnished it with an audience disproportionately composed of individuals predisposed towards receptiveness to its content or its form. By what other means could a rambling and cliché-ridden harangue from a long-retired sportsman have received hundreds of thousands of views, tens of thousands of likes, and thousands of comments—a much greater proportion of which would appear to have been supportive than been critical?

In finding that Icke's active YouTube audience appears to have been so welcoming towards his "Rothschild Zionist" conspiracy fantasy, the quantitative analysis which this article also presents contributes to scholarship in two further principal ways. First, it provides evidence that, even when conspiracy accusations superficially appear only to concern specific individuals and an entirely imaginary organisation, elements of the audience may understand those accusations to incriminate an entire category of people. If that is not the case, it is hard to imagine why anti-Jewish comments should have been so frequently made in response to a video that positioned itself only as criticising "Rothschild Zionists" and not Jews, and also to understand why such comments should have been so popular.⁷⁶

Second, the findings of the quantitative analysis illustrate the dangers of outsourcing the evaluation of content to an online user community. To reiterate, it is not only that comments supportive of Icke or his message were far more numerous than comments challenging the same,

but that the most popular supportive comments received hundreds of likes while the most popular challenging comment received only six, and that the YouTube interface by default gives more prominent placement to top-level comments with greater numbers of likes. At the time of data collection, the top comment on the video discussed here described Judaism as "a racist, psychopathic supremacist ideology" and a "gushing geyser of wickedness and amorality." Placed directly below the video by the default setting of the YouTube web interface, this virulently bigoted statement is likely to have been the only comment seen by many viewers. To find an argument against the video or its antisemitism, the viewer would have to dive into second-level comments, change the *SORT BY* option from *Top comments* to *Newest first*, or scroll through huge numbers of bigoted, positive, or neutral comments: in the default view, the first substantive argument against the video's content was found in the 154th place from the top. It is unlikely to have been seen by many viewers, buried as it was beneath more popular top-level comments.

It is with good reason that online retailers such as Amazon do not simply show customers popular reviews, instead helping them to make an informed choice by presenting them with positive and negative reviews side by side, and by enabling them to browse and compare both. We have argued that comments on YouTube videos and other forms of online content may function analogously to customer reviews, influencing viewers' estimation of the plausibility of video content by providing it with the illusion of peer review. In ranking such comments by popularity rather than quality, and making no differentiation between supportive and challenging comments, YouTube allows the more numerous side in an argument to drive out all suggestion of dissent, creating a false impression of unanimity. Although conspiracy believers often dismiss conspiracy sceptics as "sheeple," it was arguably those who found Icke's video persuasive who were following the herd—which is to say, the

apparent herd produced by YouTube's default ranking of comments by popularity.

It has been argued that "the media ecosystem has evolved in ways that undermine the likelihood . . . that true and high-quality news and information will overcome false and low-quality news [and] information."⁷⁷ The video whose content and reception we have analysed is the epitome of false, low-quality information. Yet comments that challenged its irrationality and antisemitism stood little chance of overcoming its falsehood and low quality, given the combined effects of popularity-based ranking

and systematically fewer likes. Maintenance of such a status quo is manifestly irresponsible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to Quilliam International for non-financial support.

TECHNICAL APPENDIX

Calculations and visualisations were carried out using R v. 3.6.1, with irr v. 0.84.1 for inter-rater reliability and ggplot2 v. 3.2.0 for visualisation.

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